

Prunskiene sets higher goals for U.S.

by William Jones

It was an astute and proud Lithuanian prime minister who came to Washington, D.C. on May 2, a visit which the Bush administration did everything to prevent, wanting to avoid casting any shadow on the summit meeting between President Bush and Mikhail Gorbachov at the end of May.

Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene, the only woman in the new Lithuanian government, had made inquiries with regard to an American visa at the U.S. embassy in Moscow on her return from a visit to Scandinavia in early April. Whatever the details were of that particular encounter, she was informed that this was not the appropriate time for such a high-level visit by a member of the new Lithuanian government, and that if she did come, it would have to be as a private citizen. When House Democrats got wind of this "cold-shoulder" treatment, they set off a flurry of protests, at which point the State Department and the American embassy began making fervent denials of ever having had the slightest idea of denying the prime minister a visa.

She obviously knew her task was not going to be an easy one. The failure of the Bush administration to act in the face of increasing Soviet pressures on Lithuania, culminating in a full economic blockade just days before the Prunskiene visit, made it clear to all concerned that the American President was going to do everything possible to prop up the Soviet leader and that nothing was going to deter him from that goal. It was also clear from the overwhelming support which Lithuania was getting from Americans, including many members of Congress, that President Bush's appeasement policy was not the most popular item on the agenda.

Popular support

On her arrival in Canada on April 30, the first leg of her North American tour, Prunskiene was met by representatives of the Schiller Institute who greeted her with flowers and a copy of the book *Friedrich Schiller, Poet of Freedom*. As she was leaving Ottawa for her flight to Toronto, the prime minister was greeted with the strains of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—which has become the unofficial anthem of Lithuania—played at a Schiller Institute literature table in the airport. Again in Washington, among the delegation to greet her was a representative of the Schiller Institute who presented her with flowers as she came out of the terminal.

On May 1, the Senate passed a non-binding resolution,

warning President Bush that it would not ratify any trade pact with Moscow while the Kremlin was conducting an economic embargo against Lithuania. The resolution passed with a sizable 73-24 vote. Anxious lest his Lithuanian policy become his political Achilles heel, President Bush agreed to set up a 40-minute meeting with the Lithuanian prime minister on May 1. Even that meeting did little to assuage his more voluble critics. When the limousine of the prime minister pulled up to the White House, it could not enter through the gates to drive up to the building. White House officials claimed that the door had suddenly jammed. Whatever the case may be, the prime minister had to get out of her car, show her passport to the guards at the gate, and then walk up the drive to the door of the White House.

At a press conference the following day at the National Press Club, Mrs. Prunskiene said that she had described for President Bush the situation in her country and expressed her government's plans and hopes for the future. She made it clear that "simply making statements about compromises is not adequate," when the Soviets were interfering with Lithuania's ties to other countries. Although she thought that a summit meeting could serve a positive function, she did not believe that it was wise at the present moment to grant the Soviets Most Favored Nation status, as that would indicate "implicit support" for their actions against Lithuania. Prunskiene also explained how the lack of Western recognition of an independent Lithuania had been a major argument by the Soviets to refuse to recognize the Lithuanian Declaration of Independence.

The Lithuanian prime minister had the occasion to address several congressional groups, including the congressional members of the Helsinki Commission. In her remarks she made it clear that the choice facing the U.S. administration was not between Gorbachov and Lithuania, but rather between a continued democratization in the Soviet bloc or a return to the methods of the Empire. "In fact I would contend," she said, "that the recognition of Lithuania's independence by East and West would be a tremendous victory for democratization in the Soviet Union within the context of perestroika." And besides, she noted later, "we cannot put the rights of the Empire over those of self-determination." In an interview with NBC, Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis phrased the other side of that dilemma, "If the Soviets crush an independent Lithuania, then perestroika is finished."

Prunskiene also stressed in her discussions with the congressmen that the Lithuanian government had always been quite willing to negotiate with the Soviets and would be willing to "temporarily suspend the quick and unilateral execution of the passed legislation if there were international guarantees." They would not, however, under any circumstances abrogate the March 11 Declaration of Independence, a measure which the Soviets have made into a prerequisite for any negotiations.